

Cheers to the Blean



Hop pickers posing.



Filling baskets.



Tally man and picker.



Stringing a hop garden on stilts.

All the above photographs are from the collection of Mr Fred Hams.

Hops are mostly known and grown for brewing beer, although they are also used in other beverages and herbal medicines. Their flowers provide the magic flavouring that many an ale lover has appreciated.

In Kent, fields of hops are known as hop gardens. The first English hop garden was believed to have been set up near Canterbury in 1520. By 1655 one third of the hops in England were produced in Kent, and it reached a peak in 1878, when hop gardens covered 31,000 hectares (76,600 acres) of land, and hop growing was the biggest industry in the county. Thousands of Londoners would come down to pick hops at harvest time, and enjoy a kind of working holiday in the Kent countryside.

So where does the Blean come in? Well, the hop is a climbing plant, and the climbing bines, (no it's not a spelling mistake!), need something to climb up. From around the 16th century they used wooden poles for this purpose. By the 20th century the poles were now being used to create a semi-permanent framework to attach string supports for the bines. Originally these poles would have come from ash or alder, but hop growers found the coppiced poles from sweet chestnut ideal. (Coppicing is when trees are cut almost to ground level, allowing new multiple stems to grow from the stump). Not only was it strong and straight, but also more resistant to rot at ground level.

In the Blean sweet chestnut was planted in large quantities and remains to this day one of its most common trees. From 1720 to 1740 approximately 30,000 saplings were thought to have been planted annually in just the Church Woods and Great Den Lees area. Although sweet chestnut was grown mostly for the hop industry, it was also used for mine props, charcoal, firewood and fencing. It continued to be planted through the 18th and 19th centuries, but to a much lesser degree.

For a variety of reasons, the hops industry in Kent has substantially diminished. However, in the Blean area and the neighbouring Kent Downs Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty, you can still see hop gardens and working oast houses, as well as quite large areas of chestnut coppice, some still supplying a range of local businesses, including hop growers.

The Blean has quite literally supported the brewing industry for many centuries - so 'cheers to the Blean'.

The Big Blean Walk, a long distance walking route, starts from here. For further information visit local Tourist Information Centres or www.theblean.co.uk



Hops on the bine.



Sweet chestnut coppice.



A hop garden.



Oast houses.

the **Blean** is just minutes away...

Covering over 11 square miles, the Blean is one of the largest and most distinctive areas of ancient woodland in England, important nationally for both its wildlife and its history. The Blean has been a working woodland for over a thousand years, and continues to provide woodland products, including firewood and fencing materials, for local people. The splendour and tranquillity of this special landscape can be enjoyed on a network of paths and trails. This panel is part of a series of 18 located around the Blean. To see all 18 panels, visit www.theblean.co.uk. For information about walking in Kent visit www.kent.gov.uk/explorekent.